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Baptism and Circumcision: the Relation to Judaism in the Belgic Confession

Broaching the Subject

From the first sentence on, the article on baptism in the Belgic Confession implicates the Jewish rite of circumcision and hence in a most concrete way brings in the relation to Judaism. However, this relation or its nature is nowhere addressed and it remains implicit. While it was very much a reality, it was not on the Calvinist agenda.

In 1561, when the Belgic Confession was published, the relation to the Jews was framed differently from today. For the Catholic Church, there was hardly anything new to be said as compared with the Church Fathers. Luther was another story. His high hopes for a rapprochement between Protestants and Jews at the beginning of his career had not materialized. Then when political tensions rose in the 1540's, the problems with Sabbatarians from the 1530's served as a pretext for his anti-Jewish tracts aiming at removing the Jews from Protestant lands.¹ Calvin never would revert to such methods, but as we shall see, his attitude to Judaism was full of tension and ambivalence.

The baptism article of the Confession Belgica (henceforth CB) epitomizes a similar ambivalence in relation to the Jews. For one thing, there is this silence: the subject is there, but it is never broached. Also, there are both elements reflecting a positive and a negative attitude. We shall raise questions in two directions. (1) What has occasioned this incoherence? We shall see that the theo-political situation of the day was a primary cause. (2) What are the implications for the actual relations between Jews and Christians? This refers us also back to our own day and to the question how to deal with a confession born amid great political tensions. The fragmentary documents Guy de Brès bequeathed to us, especially the CB baptism article, offer an instructive starting point.

Along our way, we shall be able to observe that the relation of the Church to Judaism is not a tangential aspect voluntarily pursued by specialists. It is a central component of Christian identity which often is both

subliminal and being overlooked. Differently put, it is fraught with contradictory meanings that at times play out in remarkable ways.

Baptism and Circumcision

When dealing with the CB and its origins, we shall start from two accepted conclusions. First, as established by the inquisitors in 1562, the CB was written and published in print by Guy de Brès.² Second, in writing it, de Brès based himself on the 1559 Gallican Confession or 'Confession of La Rochelle'. In turn, the Gallicana was an elaboration of a draft by John Calvin, the main differences being in the initial articles.³ De Brès went about it in a free way and also drew on other sources, among others the confession written by Theodore Beza.⁴ The baptism article, no. 34, is one of the significant departures from the Gallicana.

CB art. 33 introduces the two sacraments recognized by Calvinists, and art. 34 follows explaining baptism. Surprisingly, in stark contrast to the Gallicana, it starts in the negative, first defining what baptism is *not*:⁵

We believe and confess that Jesus Christ in whom the law is fulfilled, has by his shed blood put an end to every other shedding of blood, and has abolished circumcision which was done with blood, and he has established in its place the sacrament of baptism. By it we are received into God's church...

Only then follows a positive exposition about baptism. Thus, the first statement in the article is: baptism is unlike circumcision – circumcision has been abolished. One asks: what necessitates this negative opening, this setting off of the Christian rite from the Jewish?

² L.A. van Langeraad, *Guido de Bray, zijn leven en werken*, (Leiden dissertation) Zierikzee, Ochtman, 1884, 116f; E.M. Braekman, *Guy de Brès, 1. Sa vie*, (Coll. Hist. du protestantisme en Belgique et au Congo belge, 6) Brussels, Libr. des Eclaireurs unionistes, 1960, 157; N.H. Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources*, Grand Rapids, Baker, 2007, ch. 2. More cautious is J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften*, 2nd ed. Amsterdam, Bolland, 1979, ch. 1 (online: www.dbnl.org/tekst/bakh007nede01_01/).

³ O. Fatio et al. (eds.), *Confessions et catéchismes de la foi réformée*, (Pub. de la Fac. de Théol. de Genève 11) Genève, Labor et Fides, 1986, 111-113. See esp. E. de Boer elsewhere in this volume.

⁴ Langeraad, *Guido* (above n. 1) *passim*; Braekman, *Guy* (above n. 2) 160f.; E.M. Braekman, *Les sources de la Confessio Belgica*, n.p., n.d. Beza's influence: Gootjes *ibid.* (above n. 2) 77-91.

⁵ Quoted: translation of Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics (CRTA) www.reformed.org/documents/index.html. The website Confessions of Foi et Catéchismes de la Réforme protestante <http://cfcreforme.blogspot.com/> offers, apart from a modern French text, a similar but slightly un-idiomatic English translation.

¹ See the excellent study by T. Kaufmann, *Luthers »Judenschriften«. Ein Beitrag zu ihrer historischen Kontextualisierung*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2011.

The negative demarcation is connected with another element: the Law, which is said to be ‘fulfilled’ in Christ. The Law is a well-known ingredient of Protestant theology, but it never ceases to be the Jewish Law. The first edition of Calvin’s Institutes (1536) opens with an elaborate exposition of the Decalogue, on which Bernard Cottret comments: ‘The borrowing from Judaism appears clearly from the first chapter, On the Law, *De Lege*.’⁶ But that is not what our CB article tells us. The Law is ‘fulfilled’ in Christ who has abrogated circumcision and similar ceremonies. The Law is brought up already in CB art. 25, where it is stated in accord with the Gallican Confession, art. 23, ‘that the ceremonies ... of the Law have ended with the coming of Christ (...) so that the use of them ought to be abolished among Christians...’ This contrasts with the positive relation to the Jewish Law signalled by Cottret.

The negative opening is not the only remarkable thing. The baptism article also contains some passages that strikingly remind us of actual Jewish liturgical formulae to do with the sanctification of Israel and circumcision. Speaking about baptism as compared with circumcision, CB art. 34 goes on where we left off in our previous quote:

...By it we are received into God’s church
and *set apart from all other people* and alien religions,
that we may be *dedicated entirely* to him,
bearing his mark and sign (*sa marque et son enseigne*).

Compare now the *kedusha*, the benediction of ‘sanctification’ Jews say on festivals at the beginning of meal since time immemorial:⁷

You have *chosen us from all the nations*,
You loved us and desired us,
You raised us above all the tongues
and you *sanctified* us with Your commandments.

Similarly, during *kiddush* on Sabbath eve Jews say:

For you have *chosen us and sanctified us from all nations*
and your holy Sabbath you have given us with love and good will.
Blessed are you LORD, who sanctifies the Sabbath.

More striking still is the similarity with Jewish formulae near the end of the baptism article, where we read, rendering the original text:

We believe our children ought to be baptized
and *marked with the sign of the covenant* (*marquez du signe de l’alliance*),
as little children were circumcised in Israel...⁸

⁶ B. Cottret, *Calvin: biographie*, Paris, Lattès, 1995, 316.

⁷ See e.g. the prayer book of Rav Saadya Gaon from around 900 CE: I. Davison, S. Assaf, B.I. Joel (eds.), *Siddur R. Saadya Gaon*, Jerusalem, Ruben Mas, 1971 (Hebr.): on the *kedusha* p. 135, on the Shabbat *kiddush* (next quote) p. 115.

Compare with this the Jewish benediction said after a circumcision since the early Middle Ages at least:⁹

Blessed are you, LORD our God, King of the world,
who sanctified the beloved from the womb
and placed the statute in his (Abraham’s) flesh
and *sealed* his descendants *with the sign of the covenant* of holiness.

In both cases we have a string of three keywords: ‘seal’, ‘sign’, and ‘covenant’. We note that de Brès’ twice renders ‘mark’: *marque et enseigne, marquez du signe*.¹⁰ As we shall see later, ‘mark’ is a valid equivalent for ‘seal’. That being said, the coincidence of three keywords in a row seems hardly accidental. A detail that will also merit our attention is the sanctification ‘from the womb’.

We have seen that right at the beginning, the baptism article draws a parallel with circumcision in a negative sense: baptism has taken the place of circumcision, which is abolished. Toward the end of the article, however, the parallel appears another two times, now in a positive sense:

Our children ought to be baptized (...)
as little children were circumcised in Israel... (...)
Baptism does for our children
what circumcision did for the Jewish people.

In contrast to the opening statement that baptism is not like circumcision, it is now reiterated: ‘baptism is very much like circumcision.’ There is an inner tension here, a tortuousness that begs explanation. One way of understanding similar anomalies is by studying their historical context.

The Violent Sixteenth Century

It is impossible to understand the CB and its genesis otherwise than in light of the relentless repression of the Reformation in the Low Countries. Reading Langeraad’s skeleton biography assembled from the ‘hard evidence’ of judiciary protocols, *Guido de Bray*, or Braekman’s more decorated *Guy de Brès*,¹¹ one is reminded of, say, the worst images of

⁸ *Confession de foy, faicte d’un commun accord par les fideles qui conuersent és pays Bas, etc., Avec une remonstrance aux Magistrats de Flandres, Braban etc.*, 1562, online: Post-Reformation Digital Library, <http://www.prld.org/index.php> > Authors (PRDL is a wonderful project of Calvin Seminary). Both English translations as also the modern French text (see n. 5) have ‘sealed with the sign’, ‘scellés du signe’, though in the earlier passage all retain *sa marque et son enseigne*.

⁹ Davison – Assaf – Joel *ibid.* (above n. 7) 98f.

¹⁰ See above n. 8.

¹¹ Langeraad, *Guido* (above n. 2); Braekman, *Guy*, (above n. 2). On the spelling of the name (Brès / Bray) see Langeraad *ibid.* 9; Braekman, *Guy*, 10-19. see also the

Iran under the Ayatollahs. From the active period of his 45-year lifespan, de Brès could spend only some ten-odd years in his native Southern Netherlands, always on the move, always on the alert and using an alibi. For heretics like him, torture, burying alive, drowning and most of all burning at the stake were normal procedure. Decapitation was still the least barbarous punishment, and a number of victims were hung, notably de Brès himself.¹² Considering these circumstances and the pressures de Brès must have lived through, one is inclined to forgive him anything in terms of hardline theology or inconsistent reasoning. His were hard times, and, even though he insisted on preserving an irenic style,¹³ the discourse of the day was aggressive. For one thing, this means one must be careful in transposing his arguments to other situations and later times.

It would be a grave misunderstanding, however, to view the making of the CB as a mere regional martyr's story. It is also an episode in a much larger history moving on two levels in opposite directions: the history of the Habsburg dynasty and of their Spanish world empire expanding towards its maximum power, and the history of the growing independence of their subjects in the Burgundian lands.¹⁴ The centralist politics of Charles V and Philip II and their inherited spiritual rigorism typified by the merciless Inquisition forced the debates over Christian creed and ritual to develop into an outright revolt.¹⁵ The inquisition in the Low Countries was supervised by the Spanish authorities but carried out by local ecclesial and secular officials. However when Philip II appointed Granvelle archbishop of Malines in 1561, tension quickly rose because of fears he wanted to introduce the Spanish Inquisition.¹⁶

nicely edited and amplified Dutch translation of Braekman's book: E. Braekman – E. de Boer, *Guido de Bres: zijn leven, zijn belijden*, Utrecht, Kok, 2011.

¹² On capital punishment see A. Goossens, *Les inquisitions modernes dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux (1520-1633)*, 1: *La législation*; 2: *Les victimes*, Brussels, Éditions ULB, 1997-98, vol. 2: 52-56.

¹³ Thus Braekman, *Guy* (above n. 2) 221f., referring to de Brès' *Racine* against the Anabaptists.

¹⁴ For this perspective see M. van Gelderen, *The Political Thought of the Dutch Revolt 1555-1590*, Cambridge UP 2002, 13-40. See also J. Decavele, 'De Nederlanden in de tijd van De Bres', in Braekman – De Boer *ibid.* (above n. 11) 9-17.

¹⁵ Van Gelderen *ibid.* 30f. For an excellent description of the workings of the inquisition in the Southern Netherlands see Goossens *ibid.* (above n. 12).

¹⁶ First sentence of 'Breve preface des choses aduenues au Pais-bas sur le fait de la Religion', in *Procédures tenues à l'endroit de ceux de la religion du Pais-Bas*, anonymously published by de Brès' friend Jean Crespin, [Geneva] 1568, online at PRDL (above n. 8) under 'Brès, Guy de'.

Especially targeted were the Anabaptists, the 'radicals of the Reformation' who were notably numerous in the Low Countries and were considered a danger also by the Calvinists.¹⁷ As Owen Chadwick put it, 'The name Anabaptist was applied loosely and widely as a term of abuse; it covered a multitude of different opinions.'¹⁸ What united them in the eyes of their adversaries was the challenge they represented to established authority, be it religious or secular. From that perspective, there was a link between the Mennonite refusal to take oaths before magistrates or recognize baptisms by the Catholic clergy, and the violent millenarism of Thomas Müntzer. Quite probably it was the spectre of revolt against legal power that induced Calvin to finish the job of the Catholic prosecutors and burn the arch-Anabaptist, Servetus, in 1553.¹⁹

In that age, religion and politics were intertwined to the extent of composing an explosive mixture. Quite probably, Guy de Brès conferred in Brussels in 1564 with William of Orange and his brother Louis, prominent nobles in the Low Countries soon to become leaders of the revolt against Spain, in connection with their efforts to reach a religious concord.²⁰ Also, the three months' siege of Spanish-owned Valenciennes in 1567, the last episode of de Brès' life before he was imprisoned and hung, was in fact one of the first military confrontations of the incipient revolt; the 'iconoclastic fury' had raged a year earlier. At that juncture, de Brès and his colleague de la Grange were not only ministers of the local Calvinist 'church under the cross' but also spiritual leaders of the burghers of Valenciennes in their resistance to Spanish repressive power.²¹ It was the redoubled repression soon to follow that split the Low Countries into two opposed domains. The Dutch Reformation-cum-war-of-independence was not the only success story. So was the Spanish-imposed, 'Belgian' Counter-Reformation.

Viewed in that light, there is truth in Langeraad's characterization of the 1561 Belgic Confession as 'nothing but an apology in origin'.²² Indeed its author prefaced it with a letter '*au Roy Philippe leur souuerain Seigneur*', stating it was written '*pour nous defendre des crimes dont on nous charge, et monstrier l'équité de nostre cause*', and it was printed

¹⁷ Goossens *ibid.* (above n. 12) 1: 68-71; idem, 'Karel V en de onderdrukking van de wederdopers', *Doopsgezinde bijdragen* 27 (2001) 15-31. And see Decavele in this volume.

¹⁸ O. Chadwick, *The Reformation*, (The Pelican History of the Church, 3) Penguin 1964 and repr., 189-210.

¹⁹ See Cottret *ibid.* (above n. 6) 228-234, esp. 230.

²⁰ Langeraad, *Guido* (above n. 2) 58; Braekman, *Guy*, (n. 2) 196.

²¹ Van Gelderen *ibid.* (above n. 14) 30-40. For a contemporaneous report see Jean Crespin, 'Breve preface', *ibid.* (above n. 16).

²² Langeraad, *Guido* (above n. 2) 93.

'Auec vne remonstrance aux Magistrats de Flandres, Braban, Hainault,' etc.²³ Thus de Brès, possibly also reflecting the Reformers' predilection for the Church Fathers, followed in the footsteps of the first Christian Apologists pleading their cause before the Roman Emperors – although Antoninus was much less bent on burning Christians than Carolus Protestants. Another example was Calvin's Letter to the King of France prefacing the Institutes.²⁴ Viewed from the outside, the CB's bid for political legitimacy draws most attention.²⁵

A second apologetic motif is connected with this: the polemics with the Anabaptists. For de Brès, three disputed points stood out: incarnation, baptism, and legal government. All three are emphasized in the CB with explicit rejection of Anabaptist 'heresy' or 'error' (art. 18, 34, and 36).²⁶ Denouncing a heresy condemned by the state means, in the rebound, vying for legitimacy and boosting one's own apology.²⁷

But neither is human life made up of politics only. In 1559 de Brès secretly returned from his second exile and married Catherine Ramon. They had seven years of married life in Tournay, in spite of his furtive existence. Five children were born, two of whose names are certain.²⁸ One is mentioned by de Brès in his farewell letter from prison to Catherine, 12 April 1567. It is a girl named after Abraham's wife: '*Vous auez nostre fille Sarra, qui sera tantost esleeue.*'²⁹ The other is known from a judicial document citing de Brès' confiscated personal papers. It was their firstborn, a son born 31 August 1560, '*...q[ue] le lendemain il feyt baptiser et appeler ISRAËL, selon que voyons par sesds memoriaulx escriptz de sad^e main*'.³⁰ 'Israel' for a personal name, to be sure, is extremely rare among Christians, while among Jews it is only found since the Middle Ages.³¹ In the midst of political turmoil and personal suffering,

²³ Text online, see above n. 8.

²⁴ Cf. Braekman, *Guy* (above n. 2) 166 for a similar observation. The oldest preserved Apology is that of Aristides addressing Antoninus Pius, c. 140 AD.

²⁵ The political implications of de Brès' thought are highlighted by Van Gelderen *ibid.* (above n. 14) 78-82; he leaves doubt on the authorship of the CB, *ibid.* 68.

²⁶ Gootjes *ibid.* (above n. 2) 66f.

²⁷ Cf. Cottret *ibid.* (above n. 6) for similar observations re. Calvin vs. Servet.

²⁸ Braekman cites a 'Marie Debray' found in the registers of Sedan, whom he assumes was a daughter of Guy and Catherine along with 'Sarra de Brez' who is mentioned in the same source: Braekman – De Boer *ibid.* (above n. 11) 115, 379-381.

²⁹ The letter is preserved in *Procedures* (above n. 16), 356-367. De Brès addresses his wife by name and surname, 'Catherine Ramon', which suggests they were not accustomed to correspond in writing, and she may have been illiterate.

³⁰ '...Whom the following day he had baptized and named Israel, as we conclude from his aforementioned diaries written in his aforementioned hand.' Quoted by Langeraad, *Guido* (above n. 2) 47; cf. Braekman, *Guy*, (above n. 2) 120.

³¹ L.I. Rabinowitz, 'Names: In the Talmud', *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem

in the unspeakable joy of marriage and budding fatherhood, Guy de Brès had his firstborn given that most typical of Jewish names, 'Israel'.

Emphases and Implications of the Baptism Article

The name alone of the otherwise unknown Israël de Brès speaks volumes about his father's motives concerning baptism – for his mother, alas, we lack supportive sources. The namegiving betrays sympathetic associations with the biblical covenant of Abraham and hence with Jewish ritual, even though de Brès thought baptism has replaced circumcision and insisted that, other than the latter, it also applies for girls – happily so for Sarra.³² We shall find some traces of such sympathetic associations in a later work of de Brès'. First we need to analyse the special emphases of the CB's baptism article and explore a major source of influence.

To that aim, let us take a closer look at the differences between the baptism articles in the Belgica and the Gallicana.³³ Basically, the Gallicana is much briefer, here more visibly so than elsewhere. Gallicana art. 34 and the beginning of 35 having announced the two acknowledged sacraments, the rest of art. 35 soberly explains baptism in three sentences: it testifies to our adoption into the body of Christ; it needs to be done only once; and it is administered also to children of believing parents. The rejection of exclusive adult baptism is clear but unemphatic. The Belgica art. 33 introduces the two sacraments in twice as many words but otherwise in a way similar to the Gallicana. Belgica 34, however, is four times as long as the Gallicana's 35, further developing the three sentences on baptism and supplementing them with much argumentative material. Conspicuous among these additions are the mention of 'the error of the Anabaptists' and the thrice repeated circumcision imagery. Earlier we noted the contrast between the positive analogy of circumcision and baptism at the end of the article and the negative demarcation at its beginning. Further additions concern the abolition of Jewish ceremonies, the inner cleansing signified by baptism, and the allegory of Israel's desert journey.

The comparison confirms that when de Brès wrote the article, polemics with the Anabaptists was foremost in his mind, as is true for the confession as a whole.³⁴ Moreover the anti-Anabaptist stance seems to

1972, vol.12, col. 807-809 notes the absence of 'Israel' as a personal name in talmudic literature.

³² See Racine... 578f.: '*Il ne faudroit baptizer que les fils, & non pas les filles,*' etc.

³³ A convenient synoptic presentation is found in Bakhuizen *ibid.* (above n. 2).

³⁴ Cf. Gootjes *ibid.* (above n. 2) 66f.

relate to the abundance of circumcision imagery. The Belgica article is explicit about the link:

We detest the error of the Anabaptists who ...condemn the baptism of the children of believers: we believe our children ought to be baptized and marked with the sign of the covenant, as little children were circumcised in Israel.

Therefore it appears that the circumcision analogy is the linchpin of the anti-Anabaptist argument. The tortuous development of the argument must relate to the inner tensions associated with the subject.

As to the possible sources of the added materials in the baptism article, little influence can be detected of Beza's confession.³⁵ The added motifs, however, can all be retrieved from Calvin's Institutes. Pending further research, this illustrates the pervasiveness of Calvin's influence, for the Gallicana was already based on Calvin's draft. The same influence appears from the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 which in true Calvinist fashion presents baptism under question 74 as 'a sign of the covenant' also for children, just as the circumcision it has replaced. Calvin himself had been expanding the baptism chapter of the Institutes since its first, 1536 edition, notably adding the circumcision argument with its various complexities.³⁶ He clearly waged his own battle against the Anabaptists.³⁷ The baptism chapter in the 1559 Institutes even refutes one by one the arguments against infant baptism of a named adversary, 'Servetus, not the least among the Anabaptists' (4.16.31). Thus De Brès possessed all he needed in the Institutes. To be sure, he is never found copying Calvin verbally but seems to have translated Calvin's ideas into his own formulations. Let us study some important passages.

The opening part of CB art. 34 with the apparent echo of Jewish liturgy – 'set apart from all other people and alien religions' – is particularly close to Calvin. We read in the Institutes:³⁸

In fact, since the children of the Jews are called a Holy Lineage because they were inheritors of that covenant and were separated from the children of the

³⁵ Gootjes *ibid.* 77-91. But see the discussion below on the word *marque*.

³⁶ According to W. Balke, *Calvin en de doperse radikalen*, Amsterdam, Bolland, 1973, the Institutes had an apologetic intention vis-à-vis the Anabaptists from the start. The 1536 baptism chapter was strongly expanded in 1539, especially on infant baptism. See *ibid.* 37-46, 51-55, 101-109. The 1541 French edition is more emphatic still, see the notice by O. Millet (ed.), *Jean Calvin, Institution de la religion chrétienne (1541)*, édition critique, Genève, Droz, 2008, vol. 2, 1243-1248.

³⁷ See Millet *ibid.* (previous n.) 1245 and his interesting note 54 on p. 1269f.; Cottret *ibid.* (above n. 6) 280-286 (282f. on the Low Countries).

³⁸ Inst. 4.16.6, my translation from the 1541 French edition. The translation otherwise used is that by H. Beveridge published by Eerdmans, 1989, online on 24-11-2011 at CRTA, <http://www.reformed.org/>.

unbelievers and idolaters, also the children of the Christians are for the same reason called Holy (...). Indeed the Lord, having promised Abraham that covenant, wished it to be testified and sealed on the little children by the external sacrament (Gen 17:1). (...) And let it not be objected that there was no other sacrament for this testifying than circumcision, which is abrogated.

Editors have suggested that Calvin may have taken inspiration for the phrase 'separated from the children of the unbelievers' from a verse like Ezra 9:1-2, where the Israelites are called a 'holy seed' to be 'separated from the peoples of the lands with their abominations'. An even closer source is Lev 20:24, 'You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.'³⁹ There is no indication that Calvin is quoting from Jewish tradition here. Possibly then, he created these phrases out of his intimate knowledge of the Bible and his congeniality with, shall we say, 'spiritual Israel'.

The negative part of the argument, i.e., that the Law is 'fulfilled' and circumcision and other Jewish 'ceremonies' are abolished, is copiously stated by Calvin. Two samples: 'The whole apparatus of ceremonies under the Mosaic law, unless directed to Christ, is evanescent and null. ...These ceremonies ... had their fulfilment only when Christ was manifested in the flesh' (Inst. 4.14.25), and: '...Let no one think it strange that by the advent of Christ the ceremonies of the law have been abolished' (4.14.22).

We touch here on the tensions in Calvin's own attitude towards the Old Testament and the Jewish commandments. The Jewish historian Saul Baron has observed that Calvin is more positive on Judaism in his Institutes than in his biblical commentaries. When explaining Sabbath and circumcision in the Institutes, he uses biblical motifs also found in rabbinic commentaries, which he is known to have read. But when elsewhere defending himself against the accusation of 'Judaizing', he reverts to standard Christian views on the abolishment of the commandments.⁴⁰ This kind of ambivalence consists in the unresolved coexistence of two competing motives, their actual priority being dictated by external circumstances. It also occurs in the treatment of baptism and circumcision in the Institutes. When attacking the Anabaptists or pleading for legitimacy before the King, Calvin praises the Law and the commandments of the 'old covenant', fiercely rejecting the idea that they have lost their meaning. But in other contexts, he finds it necessary to affirm that the 'ceremonies', i.e. the 'Jewish' commandments, were abolished since

³⁹ Cf also Lev 20:26; Ezra 10:11; Neh 9:2; 10:29.

⁴⁰ P.J. Tomson, 'Calvin en de concrete joodse geboden – een oningeloste belofte', *Analecta Bruxellensia* 14 (2010) 164-179, discussing Baron and others, 168-173.

Christ, possibly again warding off accusations of Judaizing. A similar ambivalence appears in de Brès' arguments against the Anabaptists.

Finally, on the positive side again, there is the intriguing apparent echo of the circumcision *berakha* in the CB phrase, 'baptized and *sealed* (marked) with the *sign* of the *covenant*'. There does not seem to be a single clear explanation here. In the Institutes chapter on baptism we read: '(God) was pleased ... to embrace the seed of Abraham with his mercy, and ... to seal it by circumcision; ... so (Paul) ... says that the children of Christians derive sanctification from their parents' (4.16.15). We note Calvin's consistent use of 'seal'.

Again, biblical phrases must have played in Calvin's mind. The most important one is Rom 4:11, 'Abraham ... received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while still uncircumcised.' This yields two of our three keywords, 'sign' and 'seal'. It is a key verse for Calvin: he quotes it five times in the chapters on sacraments and baptism, once extensively citing the context.⁴¹ *Pace Calvinus*, however, there is no connection with baptism here. We shall come to that later. And although frequently using 'covenant', Calvin does not provide the keyword string, 'sign – seal – covenant'.

What makes the matter even more intriguing is the phrase preceding in the Jewish benediction: God 'sanctified his beloved from the womb'. The 'beloved' apparently is Abraham, and just as God did to him, He is said to confirm the 'sanctification' of his descendants 'from the womb' in the sign of circumcision, i.e., *including little children*. The implication is obvious in the biblical narrative, although it is not stated. For one exploiting the analogy between circumcision and baptism, this would be the perfect argument in favour of infant baptism! Would de Brès have known and used it independently from Calvin? Or could the formula have been spontaneously generated from the combined interest in Abraham's circumcision story and Paul's comments on it? Hard to decide. What is certain is that the CB in one breath condemns the Anabaptist view, uses the three circumcision keywords, and reaches out to include the children of believing parents:

...Nous detestons l'erreur des Anabaptistes qui ... condamnent le Baptisme des petis enfans des fideles, lesquels nous croyons deuoir estre baptizez & marquez du signe de l'alliance, comme les petis enfans estoient circoncis en Israël sur les mesmes promesses qui sont faites à nos enfans. (...We detest the error of the Anabaptists, who ... condemn baptizing the little children of the faithful, while we believe they should be baptized and marked with the sign of the covenant, just as the little boys were circumcized in Israel on the basis of the same promises that were made to our children.)

⁴¹ Inst. 4.14.5, 21, 23; 4.16.13, 20.

Calvin and Biblical Backgrounds

'Calvinisme oblige' – we must absolutely delve further into the Scriptures mustered up by de Brès and his Genevan master and see where they lead us. First as regards the three keywords, 'seal' or 'mark', 'sign', and 'covenant'. Two passages are central and appear as such in the expositions of Calvin and his followers: Gen 17, the story of the circumcision of Abraham and his sons, and the argument about Abraham in Rom 4 which refers back to that story.

In an interesting study, the Jewish classicist and exegete David Flusser has observed that the phrase 'seal' in connection with circumcision never appears in Gen 17 nor anywhere else in the Old Testament.⁴² What Gen 17:11 does provide are the other two keywords: circumcision is 'a sign of the covenant', *אֶת בְּרִית*. The oldest source in which Flusser found the root *חתם* 'seal' in conjunction with circumcision is the Aramaic Levi Document from Qumran. It next surfaces in Rom 4:11, 'the sign of circumcision as a seal', and Flusser thought it likely Paul knew some form of the benediction phrase.⁴³ As for translations, *חתם* in Early and Middle Hebrew means 'seal' in its various connotations which include 'sign', 'mark', and 'lock' or 'fix'.⁴⁴

In Rom 4:11, 'covenant' does not appear, nor does Paul ever use the compound, 'sign of the covenant'. The 'sign' of Abraham's circumcision is a 'confirmation (*σφραγίς*) of the faith-righteousness he had when uncircumcised'. Hellenistic Greek *σφραγίς* has a wider semantic spread than *חתם* and can designate a stamp, its imprint, the object or 'seal' carrying that imprint, and the authentication conveyed by such a contraption.⁴⁵ If Paul knew some form of the benediction formula, he has – true to character – made it serve his specific rhetorical purpose in Romans. It does not support Calvin's interpretation, as we shall see. For Paul, Abraham's circumcision sealed *not his adoption into the covenant, but his 'righteous faith'* when still uncircumcised, so that he could become 'the father of all who believe', either circumcised or not (Rom 4:11-12).

⁴² D. Flusser, 'Who Sanctified Our Beloved in the Womb', in D. Flusser, *Judaism of the Second Temple Period*, vol. 2, *The Jewish Sages and Their Literature*, Grand Rapids – Jerusalem, Eerdmans – Magnes, 2009, [191-198] 195-197.

⁴³ A next ancient source is Barn 9:6 (misread 4:6 in Flusser 195), *περιτέμνεται ὁ λαὸς εἰς σφραγίδα*. This is very similar to [...] *בְּמִילָת ... וְהָיוּ חֲתִימֵי* in the Aramaic Levi and betrays knowledge of a similar source.

⁴⁴ See KBL and Jastrow *ad voc.*

⁴⁵ See BDAG *ad voc.*, rendering *σφραγίς* in Rom 4:11 as 'something that confirms'. *σφραγίς* appears as *סְפָרוּס* (see *var. lect.*) in Bereshit Rabba 7.14; 49.2 (Theodor-Albeck 294, 500) and there has the more limited meaning of a 'seal' fixing a lock.

In view of this, de Brès' consistent rendering 'mark' in the 1561 CB and other texts is not a bad one.⁴⁶ The baptized bear '*sa marque et son enseigne*', his mark and sign, and likewise their children are to be baptized and '*marquez du signe de l'alliance*', marked with the sign of the covenant. Nor was he the only one to prefer this rendering: we find it also in the confession of Beza, possibly his teacher in Greek.⁴⁷ Interestingly, in his later work, *La racine, source, et fondement des Anabaptistes*, de Brès has switched preferences and renders 'seal'.⁴⁸ Has he been converted to Calvin's preferred rendering? In any case, this makes the CB vocabulary the more noteworthy.

Calvin did prefer the rendering 'seal' because it offered him the association with the authentication of a document. This is explicit in Inst. 4.14.5 which refers to 'seals affixed to diplomas' and presents Abraham's circumcision as cited in Rom 4:11 as an 'attestation to the covenant'. Calvin's interpretation involves a decisive shift in focus as compared with Paul. *Paul focussed on Abraham's faith* which, though being 'confirmed' by the sign of circumcision, encompasses non-Jewish believers. *Calvin, however, stresses the covenant* which is 'testified' by circumcision. Of necessity this entails ignoring the fact that Paul's churches vitally consisted of believers who either lived as Jews or as non-Jews.⁴⁹ It also implies confounding them all into a single 'new covenant' which replaces the one with Abraham and his descendants.

There is another obstacle in Calvin's explanation which we already hinted at, a major one. Nowhere does the central passage, Rom 4:9-12, speak of baptism. It only features the keywords faith, justification, and circumcision. For Paul, baptism is in a different category. It is developed in Rom 6 in an apocalyptic perspective, and it involves both Jews and

⁴⁶ The baptism chapter in the 2nd ed. of *Le baston de la foy chrestienne*, etc., 1561, 102 (online: PRDL, see above n. 8), also has *signe et ... marque*, and this is maintained in the 1565 ed., 321. (*ibid.*).

⁴⁷ *Confession de la foy chrestienne, contenât la confirmatiô d'icelle, & la refutation de superstitions contraires*, par Theodore de Besze, imprimé par Conrad Badius, MDLIX, online at PRDL (above n. 8), 132-134. Interestingly, on each of these pages Beza uses *marque*, *marquez*, but on p. 132 he comments in addition: '*La Circuncision ... est appelee par saint Paul le seau [!] de la iustice.*' Is he quoting Calvin this time? On Beza as a teacher of de Brès see Braekman, Guy (above n. 2) 115f.

⁴⁸ Abraham has received circumcision *pour un seau de la iustice de foy, comme l'appelle saint Paul*, and likewise his offspring *estoit seellée par le signe de la Circuncision*. Guy de Brès, *La racine, source, et fondement des Anabaptistes ou Rebaptisez de nostre temps...*, chez Pierre de S. André M D XCV, online: PRDL (above n. 8), 533 and 561 (twice).

⁴⁹ Thus K. Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles, and Other Essays*, London, SPCK, 1977, distinguishing Paul's specific emphasis from Luther and Augustine and heralding 'the new perspective on Paul'.

Greeks. The idea that baptism parallels circumcision and has replaced it in a chronological perspective is alien to the New Testament.

More seriously, saying that the community of the baptized replaces that of the circumcised runs counter to Paul's entire argument. The Letter to the Romans addresses 'you gentiles', saying, 'remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you', for 'the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable', and Israel's 'are the covenants, the lawgiving, the promises...' (Rom 11:13, 18, 29; 9:4). Again: 'The value of circumcision (is) much in every way.' And Paul adds, echoing a tradition similar to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: 'Not he is a Jew who is one in public, nor "circumcision" if this is publicly', but who is so 'in secret, ... in the heart through the spirit not the letter'.⁵⁰

As from the beginning of the gospel, baptism is of another order than circumcision. Here, Anabaptists do have a major point against Calvinists. Luke, most probably Paul's companion, tells us that Mary's first-born was circumcised on the eighth day, and when he was 'about thirty years of age' he was baptized by John (Luke 2:21; 3:21-23). It is similar in Luke's main source, Mark. Jesus, whose early age remains unknown but must have included circumcision, was baptized by John before he began his proclamation of 'the good news of God' (Mark 1:9-15).

Moreover, baptism quite probably was part and parcel of Jesus' own preaching. The synoptic Gospels are silent there, telling only that he proclaimed 'the gospel of God' (Mark 1:15). But when the Apostles take over after his death and resurrection, baptism is suddenly there whole and complete. Thus it seems only logical that the proclamation of the gospel went along with baptism from the start. Indeed so much is stated in a singular tradition in John: 'Jesus and his disciples ...baptized. ...Jesus was ...baptizing more disciples than John, although Jesus himself did not baptize but his disciples' (John 3:22; 4:1f.). For a while, Jesus and John even baptized side by side. Further sources inform us of other Jewish baptist and reformist movements.⁵¹ Whatever the relation to these, the Qumran communities and the larger Essene movement also had a variegated practice of immersion and baptism. In that context, John followed by Jesus proclaimed their message and baptized.⁵² There is need nor justification to view this in opposition to circumcision.

⁵⁰ Rom 2:28-3:2, comparing ἐν τῷ φανερόν / ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ on Matt 6:1-18, and taking περιτομή, typical in Paul, as a metonymy. Another major support verse of Calvin's, Col 2:11-12, has baptism (being buried with Christ) *paralleling* circumcision (putting off the body of flesh), *not replacing* it, as read in Inst. 4.14.24; 4.16.11.

⁵¹ Cf. Ch. Perrot, *Jésus et l'histoire*, 2nd ed. Paris, Desclée, 1995, 87-118.

⁵² Similar insights are expressed in one of the most concise and beautiful parts of K. Barth's dogmatics, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* 4/4, Zürich, EVZ-Verlag, 1967.

De Brès on Jews and Judaism

Our inquiry has revealed a measure of affinity with Judaism in de Brès that exceeds the parameters set by Calvin. Caution is advisable, for evidence is scanty. We must also keep in mind that if de Brès did have this affinity, he has encased it in militant statements about ‘fulfilment of the Law’ and ‘abolition of the ceremonies’. Just so, the hazy possibility of familiarity with the circumcision ceremony becomes intriguing in light of that singular biographical detail: the Jewish name of his firstborn. More interesting information is found in de Brès’ later work against the Anabaptists.

La racine, source, et fondement des Anabaptistes appeared in 1565.⁵³ It is a voluminous, meandering work which de Brès wrote during a three year stay in the safe haven of Sedan castle. It realized a life-long ambition: as with Calvin, but more urgently so, debates with Anabaptists and especially Mennonites had always been on his mind.⁵⁴ Apart from some appendices, the book is in three parts: 1. the rise of the Anabaptists; 2. incarnation; and 3. infant baptism. Part 3 contains detailed expositions of the biblical passages involved in the baptism dispute, and it is here that we find revealing reflections on the relation to the Jews.

Chapter 6, interestingly titled ‘Circumcision and baptism having the same aim’, starts out with the cryptic statement that because baptism as a sacrament has succeeded circumcision, there is no reason why the children of Christians should not be accepted for baptism as readily as the children of the Hebrews for circumcision (*Racine*, 560). The logic is opaque, but it serves the Calvinist argument which acclaims the *value* of the circumcision commandment while denying its *validity*.

There follow, however, a series of paraphrased passages that are rather more sympathetic to the New Testament world as reviewed above. Peter on Pentecost Day incites the Jews to get baptized along with their children, thus teaching later readers that, ‘we who are the Christian people, we are, along with the believing Jews, but one people, one body’ (cf. Acts 2:39). Likewise Paul, comparing Israel with an olive tree whose trunk are the Patriarchs but whose unbelieving branches have been cut away and replaced by believing branches from the wild olive tree, says

⁵³ Above n. 46. See Braekman, *Guy*, (above n. 2) 217-222 on its genesis.

⁵⁴ Thus explicitly Crespin, ‘Breve preface’ (above n. 16), apparently speaking about the *Racine*: ‘...Ce qu’il a assemblé contre les Anabaptistes, ausquels il s’est toujours vivement opposé. Regarding baptism, *Racine*, 502 apostrophizes the *Anabaptistes* as *messieurs les Menonistes et Franiques*.’ On p. 806 the latter are said to recognize the legality of magistrates, while Menno does not. Dr. Erik de Boer kindly explained to me that ‘Franiques’ were Anabaptists from the Frisian town of Franeker.

Jesus has become a minister to both Jews and gentiles, while the latter are invited ‘to rejoice with his people’. De Brès adds a comment which is hard to square with Calvin’s conception of Israel and the Church: ‘Let us note that he does not say that the Jews are made co-heirs with the gentiles, but the gentiles with the Jews, for we were strangers ourselves’ (562f., paraphrasing Rom 11:17-24; 15:7-13). Similarly, Jesus in his parables of the vineyard and the banquet shows us how ‘the children of the Kingdom’ will be thrown out, while ‘we, the gentiles’ are admitted, not to another banquet or another God, but to the same God and the same banquet, ‘from which the poor Jews (*les pources Iuifs*) are ejected, while we are seated in their place’ (Matt 21:23-22:13; 8:12). And, amazingly, ‘The true children of God are called by St. Paul, “Jews inwardly”, circumcised of heart and mind, not following the letter’ (566).

Overlooking our findings, we are left with disparate elements that in their heterogeneity seem to defy explanation. On the one hand, de CB’s baptism article, while deploying the circumcision analogy to defend infant baptism, features an extraordinary demarcation against Judaism. On the other, while probably already brooding over his ‘Belgic’ adaptation of the Gallicana in the year 1560, de Brès had his firstborn christened – if the oxymoron is bearable – with the very Jewish name of ‘Israel’. Finally, his later expositions which we just quoted betray a remarkable sympathy for the ‘poor Jews’.

A circumstance which could explain this contradictory configuration is the presence of conversos, baptized Jews also called *marranos*, in the Low Countries, especially Antwerp; we know that de Brès frequently visited Antwerp. Charles V took shifting positions on this issue, but the Spanish inquisition was notorious for its anti-marrano orientation.⁵⁵ Therefore the possibility that the ‘anti-circumcision’ framing of the baptism article was meant to ward off suspicions of Judaizing is worth considering; we recall the fears of the introduction of the Spanish inquisition after Granvelle’s appointment in 1561. Another piece of information is Catherine’s surname, Ramon. If it reflected a converso background,⁵⁶ it would make the choice of her son’s name more understandable. For the moment, this remains mere speculation.

⁵⁵ See Goossens *ibid.* (above n. 12) 1:71-73 on *marranos* and Charles’ ambivalence. On the anti-Jewish orientation of the Spanish inquisition cf. W. Monter, ‘The Mediterranean Inquisitions of early modern Europe’, in R. Po-Chia Hsia (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 6, *Reform and Expansion 1500-1660*, Cambridge UP 2007, 283-301, 661-661.

⁵⁶ While Ramon seems to have been frequent as a Spanish first name, Inquisition documents mention the Catalonian converso Antoni Ramon Corró who was burned with his wife and son in 1484. See N. Roth, *Conversos, Inquisition, and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain*, Madison, U. of Wisconsin Press, 1995, repr. 2002, 84.

Re-Interpreting the Belgic Confession

The passages just cited are clippings from a truncated oeuvre created in a tormented era. In a less barbarous age, they could contribute to a more positive evaluation of Judaism in Christian theology, which is why they interest us today. In de Brès' day, ruthless state violence towards citizens and a discourse of theological radicalism made for demonization of the opponent. Jews, along with 'Turks' and 'Popes' the favourite enemies of Protestants,⁵⁷ were evil in themselves even if they behaved as decent citizens. Anabaptists of all sorts confounded were delivered to the devil and, just as easily, to the stake.

If there is one lesson to be drawn from our explorations, it is about care in handling hallowed formulations hammered out in conflictuous situations. They ought to be *not only remembered but also interpreted* in correlation with the tribulations from which they have sprung. As to the CB, it is difficult to see its threefold condemnation of the Anabaptists other than as a reflection of de Brès' tormented days.⁵⁸

The relation to Judaism is more contradictory: on top of the idea of supersession of the Jewish law, there is this inner identification. Given the polarized language of his day, it is remarkable that de Brès presents being 'a Jew inwardly' as a *positive* quality in Christians. Two more recent interpreters, sophisticated exegetical tools at hand, read 'the Jew in us' as a *negative* theological category: the Dutchman K.H. Miskotte and the German Ernst Käsemann, both, curiously, active supporters of the German Confessing Church inspired by Barth in resisting Hitler.⁵⁹

In re-interpreting the CB, could we develop this positive potential of de Brès' legacy? Can Calvinists and other Christians rejoice in parenthood and have children baptized by whatever exotic names are on offer today, while *also* 'rejoicing with his people' when in their midst a son is circumcised and given a name like 'Abraham' or 'Israel'?

One way of helping this come about could be by letting New Year's day, anyway a bleak character on the Christian calendar, gain some colour from the traditional Catholic, Orthodox, and Lutheran celebration of *Jesus' circumcision* on that day, the 'eighth day of Christmas'. Are we not taught that in this respect his Jewish mother and father performed 'everything required by the Law of the Lord' (Luke 2:21, 39)?

⁵⁷ The *Remonstrance* following the CB mentions *luifs, Turcs & Payens* in this vein.

⁵⁸ Cf. B. Hort, 'Calvinisme et anabaptisme: plaidoyer pour un dialogue renouvelé', *Analecta Bruxellensia* 14 (2010) 192-198. See also Peter De Mey in this volume.

⁵⁹ See P.J. Tomson, 'Miskotte, Breukelman en Marquardt over Tenach, talmood en Evangelie', in D. Stegeman, I. Kooistra and D. Boer (eds.), *Marquardt lezen*, Baarn, Ten Have, 2003, 134-160.